

## ④ Assessing to Differentiate Instruction

preview

**T**his chapter presents assessment as integral to the problem-solving process teachers use to gather data about factors that influence students' comprehension success. Assessment should be used to uncover both student strengths and needs (versus weaknesses). Such information is essential for teachers to craft comprehension instruction that is customized to the diverse needs of today's students. The chapter discusses this kind of instruction, called "differentiated instruction," in relation to the characteristics of a

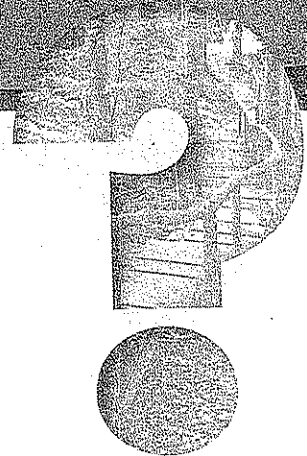
variety of learners, including English learners and low-performing students.

The chapter also highlights an additional purpose of assessment: to motivate students to learn. Assessment FOR learning holds promise for improving students' comprehension development.

The chapter explains examples of informal assessment tools, as well as guidelines for conducting and using assessment information. Assessment tools are also featured in the appendices.

# important questions

1. What is assessment and why is it important?
2. What guidelines are important for judging assessment?
3. How are learner strengths and needs linked to assessment?
4. What different types of assessment exist, and which types are recommended for comprehension? Why?
5. What do the Five Factors have to do with assessment?
6. What is assessment for learning (AfL)?
7. What is differentiated instruction? Why is it needed?
8. How can teachers differentiate instruction for diverse learners?



## Introduction

Isn't it ironic, the state doesn't test what really makes us special. They don't even know how.

T. ROBERTS, 2004

**T**eaching students to use the Comprehension Problem Solving (CPS) process to find and create big ideas is an important piece of the comprehension puzzle. More pieces are needed, however, to complete the picture. One is assessment. Effective teachers assess what makes learners special, along with other factors. They gather assessment information about the most influential factors that determine comprehension success. The goal is not just to collect scores and track student progress. Assessment data should be used to change instruction—to teach differently, because students are different. In this process, teachers use problem solving to design instruction likely to increase success. Teaching, like comprehension, involves inquiry.

Currently, widely used comprehension assessments focus on a few tasks and thus limit the literacy curriculum to the teaching of those few tasks. It is tempting to test what is easiest to measure, such as word pronunciation and fact knowledge. As Albert Einstein cautioned, however, what is easiest to count may not count the most.

Good comprehension assessment is expansive. It considers the product or outcomes of comprehension (i.e., learning content), the processes that create understanding, and much more. Effective comprehension assessment targets all of the Five Factors that influence success. The goal is differentiated instruction. This is the antithesis of the destructive practice of "handing a pacing guide to teachers and giving them no say in its development and no choice about implementing it" (Knight, 2009, p. 512).

## Using the Five Factors for Assessment

**A**ssessment is about asking questions and seeking answers. The Five Factors that impact comprehension (bolded below), combined with the five W + H questions, serve to organize the assessment questions teachers need to ask (Lipson & Wixson, 1997; RAND, 2002):

- WHO am I teaching? (specific **learner** characteristics)
- WHAT am I teaching? (critical literacy **tasks**, such as CPS)
- WHY am I teaching the task? (student needs and the importance of the literacy **task**)
- WHAT materials are best? (variety of content-rich **texts**)
- WHERE should I teach? (learning **context** that is supportive)
- WHEN should I teach a particular concept or skill? (**learner** readiness to learn and district course of study)
- HOW should I instruct students? (differentiated **teaching** practices based on identified student strengths and needs)

Many aspects of the Five Factors are *external and visible*, which makes them easier to assess (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). Observable factors include (1) the organization and format of texts, (2) aspects of the comprehension task, (3) the context in which the text is used (where and with whom), and (4) teaching methods. *Internal invisible* comprehension factors have to do with the learner's cognition and emotions. Teachers need tools to uncover and reveal specifics about each student's motivation, background, knowledge of, and ability to use comprehension strategies within the CPS process.

No single assessment tool yields a perfect picture of these factors. Assessment is always about estimating, so multiple tools are needed and assessment must be continuous. Continuous monitoring of the Five Factors enables teachers to approach planning flexibly and make good instructional choices moment by moment, day by day, and week by week, using assessment data as a guide.

The complexity of the comprehension task and variability in learner characteristics, texts, and learning contexts make effective assessment complex. Add individual teacher variables and assessment can seem daunting. Nonetheless, evidence is necessary for informed decision making and central to how effective teachers approach instruction. Assessment allows teachers to know where to start and how to stay on track.

## Using Assessment to Plan Instruction

**C**ontemporary assessment is correlated with national, state, and local standards created by professional organizations, such as the International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English. *Standards* are goals that describe what students should *know*, *do*, and *be* related

to tasks such as comprehension (Drake & Burns, 2004). Good assessment gives students multiple ways to show what they know and can do in relation to comprehension. This information gives clues to the kinds of readers, listeners, and viewers they are becoming.

Assessment is a part of instructional problem solving used to craft appropriate instruction (Pressley, 2007). It involves collecting and using data. If assessment information is not used as the basis of instructional planning, collecting that information is a waste of time and money. The entire planning process can be summarized with the acronym APIE: assess, plan, implement, and evaluate (Stephens, 1970).

**A** Assess. The first step in planning instruction is to gather information about the Five Factors, as discussed previously.

**P** Plan. Assessment should result in a flexible plan to differentiate instruction using whole-group, small-group, and individual teaching formats embedded with the other best comprehension practices that were listed in Ready Resource 3.5.

**I** Implement. Once the instructional plan is implemented, teachers monitor student responses, re-assess, and revise instruction with success for all students in mind.

**E** Evaluate. Teachers continually evaluate the effectiveness of the plan, based on student improvement and long-term comprehension gains. Genuine effectiveness results in long-term gains, not fleeting success with a lone strategy or short-term retention of isolated facts.

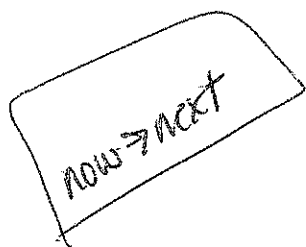
The goal is for students to do what good readers do: take an inquiry stance to texts and use a problem-solving repertoire to extract and construct big ideas. Excellent comprehension instruction seeks a deep change in *how* students think and *what* they think.

We gather assessment data to answer the questions "What's going on now?" and "What should happen next?" For example, teachers need to know where each student is in the development of self-regulated use of problem-solving strategies. Does the student start text use with clear purposes? Does the student generate questions about connections between the text and his or her background and immediate purposes? To what degree does the student initiate such strategies? Appendices A and B contain example checklists to record student acquisition of CPS strategies over time. This kind of informal assessment data is used to plan instructional experiences, including regular conferencing, to motivate students to work toward the goal of effective strategy use.

## Assessment for Learning (AfL)

**W**e assess in order to inform instructional planning and to monitor student progress. But there is another purpose: to motivate learning.

Assessment for learning (AfL) is an approach to assessment that promotes comprehension achievement by putting student motivation at the center of thinking about texts. Of particular importance is sharing assessment results with students so they can set comprehension goals, which then will direct future learning efforts. Coupled with ongoing feedback on progress toward



specific goals, AfL has proved a strong influence on motivation and learning (Stiggins, 2004). It rivals one-on-one tutoring in effectiveness, especially with low-performing students, because assessment is FOR learning, not just OF learning. AfL changes *how* students comprehend; it does not just measure *what* they comprehend. It is formative—it involves doing observation and giving feedback as students practice strategies like inferring or imagining. AfL can be summative, too, when it describes achievement results.

In AfL, comprehension goals are made clear through teacher think alouds, work samples, rubrics, and checklists. Assessment results detail where students stand in comparison to progress points toward top comprehension goals. These top comprehension goals include (1) understanding of big ideas (products) and (2) use of the CPS process. Students become assessors themselves: they self-measure by using varied informal tools, such as checklists and rubrics, which are central in clarifying literacy goals. Students track their own progress and make changes, using feedback, which in turn increase the quality of their work.

In sum, teachers who use assessment for learning

1. determine criteria for success at the outset.
2. create fluid assessment criteria.
3. give continuous, specific feedback.

## DETERMINING CRITERIA FOR SUCCESS AT THE OUTSET

Specific aspects of the comprehension task need to be made clear to students in advance of text use (refer to Ready Resource 4.1). This "front loading" engages the students' motivation to learn and unites students and teachers in pursuit of excellent work. Students come to understand that feedback is meant to increase comprehension, not grade it.

Comprehension criteria or goals are best developed when teachers work with students, explaining what high-level comprehension is and modeling how it is achieved through CPS strategies. Teachers provide both examples and non-examples so students can observe what to do and what not to do. Students are asked to identify good and poor examples of comprehension strategy use, and they should immediately practice strategies modeled in the context of continuous text, rather than practicing with isolated sentences or words. ✓

## CREATING FLUID ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Although goals need to be specified, room should be left for the unexpected. No teacher can anticipate all the possible manifestations of something as complex as the comprehension process or the products students may create to show understanding. Teachers have to be ready to embrace novel evidence. For example, a student may offer an answer that doesn't seem to show the CPS process of inference. The teacher should follow up with questions like, "How are you thinking that answer is an inference?" Questions like this one seek more information (assessment) and allow the teacher either to re-teach inferring (e.g., define it, give examples, or model again) or agree that the student's answer made sense.



## Criteria for creating a comprehension rubric.

Comprehension is both a process and a product. The comprehension *product* has two main features: immediate understanding and long-term knowledge gain (RAND, 2002). Top- and bottom-level descriptors for a Comprehension Task Rubric are provided below. To use the rubric, simply add two or more gradients between these levels for both the product and the process. Note that there is overlap between product and process criteria.

**Description:** Use a problem-solving repertoire of strategies to construct meaning or create solutions that feature big ideas. Big ideas are the complete thoughts that a reader, listener, or viewer can draw from any text.

### TOP LEVEL COMPREHENSION PRODUCT

Students should be able to ...

- ▣ Find and shape *explicit* big ideas (complete thoughts) from texts.
- ▣ Construct summaries and synthesize products that demonstrate comprehension of high-value big ideas.
- ▣ Justify conclusions (big ideas) using text evidence and background knowledge.
- ▣ Construct *original* big ideas (complete thoughts) from texts using text evidence and background knowledge to support these conclusions.
- ▣ Explain that the goal of comprehension is to *make sense* by using problem-solving strategies to find and construct big ideas using text evidence and background knowledge.

### TOP LEVEL COMPREHENSION PROCESS

Students should be able to ...

- ▣ Persist in problem solving until the comprehension task is accomplished.
- ▣ Concentrate, focus, and sustain text engagement until the comprehension task is accomplished.
- ▣ Independently, flexibly, and purposefully use a complete set of comprehension problem-solving strategies to find and construct big ideas derived from text evidence and relevant background knowledge.
- ▣ Adjust strategies to text characteristics that reflect the author's or artist's purposes.
- ▣ Make unusual connections among concepts, topics, and themes.
- ▣ Explain the comprehension strategies they used to derive big ideas.
- ▣ Explain their choices and provide evidence to support their big ideas (details and patterns).
- ▣ Judge, use, and respond creatively to diverse texts, including electronic and multimedia texts.
- ▣ Work collaboratively, including listening and giving suggestions, to make sense of texts.
- ▣ Use written, technology-based, and artistic forms to show comprehension (product).

Process + Product!

Benchmarks

Continued.

LOW LEVEL  
COMPREHENSION PRODUCT

Students should be able to ...

- Find key concepts, topics, and explicit main ideas in paragraphs.
- Construct paragraph-level main ideas from relevant details, with coaching.
- Construct big ideas from above, with coaching.
- Retell key information, such as narrative elements.
- Say that the goal of comprehension is to make sense of texts, without necessarily being able to explain or give examples of what this means.

LOW LEVEL  
COMPREHENSION PROCESS

Students should be able to ...

- Complete the comprehension task with scaffolding.
- Concentrate on the text, when supervised.
- Name a few comprehension strategies, when prompted.
- Predict, image, and make personal connections to texts, when prompted.
- Connect the text with background knowledge, although the connections may be tangential or irrelevant.
- Explain and give examples of basic differences between nonfiction and fiction and between stories and informational materials.
- Use and respond to diverse texts, including electronic and multimedia texts, by following directions.
- Work collaboratively, including listening and giving suggestions, to make sense of texts, under the direction of a teacher.
- Use oral, written, technology-based, and artistic forms to show comprehension (product), when these forms are highly structured.

READY  
RESOURCE  
4.1

## GIVING CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

Students are more likely to sustain motivation and meet goals when they receive specific guidance. Constructive or descriptive feedback provides this guidance. That's why athletic coaches routinely use constructive feedback to describe what they see athletes doing that is working or not working.

Constructive feedback is more than praise. For the purpose of comprehension, it focuses on the teacher describing what and how students seem to be thinking and on scaffolding so students think more deeply. For example, "You seem to be inferring that the spider was dumb. What in the song makes you think that?"

Constructive feedback often involves questioning, followed by feedback. Questions like, "What are you thinking?" and "Why?" can help students describe their ideas so teachers can then respond. Other questions, like, "What is working?" "What do you need to do?" and "How can I help?" ensure that students comprehend the purpose of feedback and understand they are expected to participate in solving their own problems.

The most meaningful feedback is not one-shot. Feedback should be ongoing, and it can come from sources besides teachers. For example, students can self-assess their own thinking strategies by using a checklist of CPS strategies and then give themselves feedback. Peers should also be taught how to give constructive feedback that is specific and useful.

## 7 principles Principles of Assessment



even important principles guide the selection, construction, administration, and use of assessment tools.

### 1. FOCUS ON STRENGTHS AND NEEDS

Although it is common to assess what students don't know and can't do, it is more effective to identify their strengths. Student needs can then be addressed through their strengths. For example, CPS strategies can be practiced with any text, so why not use texts of high interest? To do so, teachers use tools such as interviews and interest surveys early in the year. If a student knows a lot about raccoons, teach him strategies by using texts about raccoons. These can be fiction, nonfiction, or even texts the student generates by writing or through dictation to the teacher. Students may end up reading different books during independent reading time and reading some common texts (e.g., ones on animals) during small-group work.

### 2. ASSESS AUTHENTICALLY

When information about comprehension is gathered in a context and a manner that reveal what students really know and can do, it is called "authentic." Paper-and-pencil tests are inauthentic when they fail to capture complex thinking, such as CPS. An example of authentic assessment is coaching students to explain their thinking about a text at the moment of use. This kind of coached conversation should take place frequently, and it provides valuable information to gauge progress. The CPS Checklist (Appendix B.2) can be used to guide observation and coaching.

### 3. ASSESS HUMANELY AND REALISTICALLY

Assessment must be humane and doable. The process has to uplift, not discourage students. Sitting side by side doing an interview or going over a checklist can be socially rewarding and enjoyable. Students should feel proud of their gains and motivated by clear goals that are made concrete in progress folders (see the discussion of portfolios later in this chapter). The challenge is to create assessment tools and procedures as creative and dimensional as



comprehension itself. Note: If you sit with your dominant hand away from the child, you can make notes with less distraction. Kids may ask what you are writing, and there is no reason not to show them.

#### 4. MAKE ASSESSMENT MULTIFACTORED

No single checklist or collection of anecdotal notes can create a full portrait of a learner's comprehension (Pressley, 2007). All assessment results are samples that merely provide estimates. Multiple and varied assessments reveal a more complete picture of a student's thinking about comprehension. In addition, use of several different kinds of assessment gives breadth of information to document comprehension process and product growth more accurately over time.

Culminating projects (presentations, performances, and exhibits) and portfolios may be combined with traditional tests to show the ultimate comprehension product—the big ideas that make up content or subject matter. The opportunity to choose *how* to show comprehension motivates students, especially those who have a track record of failure with traditional tests. Writing in diverse forms, participating in discussions, and creating arts products are important response options for students and assessment opportunities for teachers. These alternatives result in observable products that make comprehension visible. Chapter 9 explains more about response options.

#### 5. USE ONGOING ASSESSMENT

Assessment data should be collected in many ways and from a variety of sources in an ongoing manner. Parent and student interviews, student self-reflection on goals, teacher observation, and peer feedback are important. Every lesson should include assessment opportunities. For example, teachers can punctuate lessons with time to discuss strategies that are working or not working and how to make strategy use more effective. Written drafts and work samples can be collected to help the teacher lay out concrete progress (e.g., use of more details to support big ideas constructed from texts).

#### 6. MAKE ASSESSMENT TRANSPARENT

Daily observation of students working in real time on real comprehension tasks is the bulwark of comprehension assessment. Teachers can use sticky notes on a clipboard to jot down what a student is doing and what might be needed. These notes can easily be transferred to individual folders, which students should be able to access. Imagine a bin of folders students examine daily because they want to know about their own progress. Imagine students eager to see the latest note posted by the teacher, and students noting evidence of their own. Imagine them *requesting* conferences to discuss progress. Imagine first graders asking the teacher to include evidence they provide about their own strategy use. Vision can become reality when basic assessment principles guide common practice.

## 7. ASSESS TECHNOLOGICAL CAPABILITIES

Electronic texts are now common reading, listening, and viewing (Casey, 2008). Educators need to teach and assess digital text knowledge and skills, especially online reading capabilities. Educational Testing Service, among other groups, is developing models for assessing online digital literacy, and the State Educational Technology Directors Association offers frameworks for assessing technology literacy (Coiro, 2003a, 2003b). Unfortunately, state reading assessments do not currently measure the strategies needed to navigate and comprehend text online (Leu et al., 2004). Chapter 5 includes guidelines for teaching Internet use, Chapter 6 addresses motivational properties of digital texts, and Chapter 9 examines how students can create texts, including written, arts-based, and computer-generated texts, to show comprehension.

### Types of Assessment

**C**omprehension assessment should identify specific needs that must be addressed if students are to be put on a successful path. It is inadequate to confine assessment to sub-skills, such as word recognition fluency and decoding, since comprehension is not merely the consequence of adding up phonic skills and accumulating new words. Children may have adequate word-level skills but lack key comprehension assets, especially problem-solving skills and relevant background knowledge (RAND, 2002). Effective comprehension assessment should reveal how students

- are motivated, especially through interests and goals.
- think about themselves as readers and comprehenders, especially their views on good readers and the role of meaning making in reading.
- use problem-solving strategies—which ones, when, how, and for what reasons.
- use information from texts to solve problems in their own lives or the world.
- change and build knowledge (big ideas), including how they respond to “what if” and “I wonder why” questions.
- think about texts, including their structure, format, accuracy, and artistry.
- respond emotionally and aesthetically to texts.

As a result of the need to identify so many different factors, effective assessment takes a variety of forms, including external evaluation, benchmark assessments, and classroom assessments.

1. External evaluation is a process of using standardized tests to make decisions at the school and district level. Student achievement is compared to state and national norms, and data are used to cite individual schools for excellence or lack of adequate yearly progress. Program assessment is not addressed in this book.

2. Benchmark assessments are used to gauge student progress toward curricular goals and standards. Teachers use these tests for instructional

Brainstorm -

planning, especially grouping for needs and communication with students and parents.

3. Classroom assessments aid teachers in planning differentiated instruction. These assessments are informal tools that zero in on specific comprehension needs and strengths. This form of assessment is the focus of this chapter.

*Gathering evidence*

## ASSESSMENT VERSUS EVALUATION

*— goodness — value*

I keep this quote posted near my desk: "A grade is an inadequate report of an inaccurate judgment by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an indefinite amount of material" (Dressel, 1983, p. 10). The terms *assessment* and *evaluation* are often used interchangeably, but *assessment* is distinct from *evaluation* and *grading*. *Evaluation* focuses on judging goodness (i.e., placing a value judgment on progress), while *assessment* focuses on gathering evidence, particularly through teacher observation.

## SUMMATIVE VERSUS FORMATIVE

External evaluation (versus student self-evaluation), including grading, is a reality in the schools. It occurs after instruction and summarizes learning, hence the label *summative*. Assessment that begins before teaching and continues during the learning process to inform and form teaching and learning is formative assessment. Formative assessment should be embedded in all lessons and should include both teachers and students. Teachers need to observe student responses continually and modify their teaching based on that feedback. For example, teachers may ask more questions, give additional examples, change the pace, and so on. Students also need to do self-assessment to help "form" their own learning. For example, they can track their use of targeted CPS strategies during independent reading. Self-assessment boosts ownership of comprehension, because the learner decides what is working and not working. Goal setting should follow and should focus on personal improvement, not just grades.

*What are all the ways the teacher gathers evidence throughout the day?*

## FORMAL VERSUS INFORMAL

Formal tools (i.e., standardized tests) are mostly used to obtain summative data on student performance for program evaluation. With analysis, standardized tests can reveal specific needs (e.g., problems with inferring), but the analysis process is labor intensive and of limited use, since how students arrived at their answers remains unknown.

Informal tools yield specific information about comprehension, not just percentiles or grades. They give teachers what they need: specifics to teach (Rutzel, 2007). Students can also use these tools to set goals.

Common informal assessment tools, such as informal reading inventories (e.g., Leslie & Caldwell, 2006), and running records assess some aspects of comprehension. These tools allow teachers to observe students reading orally, which can be telling. However, using these tools alone is inadequate for assessing com-

Some critiques  
of Tummy  
the reader

prehension, and every tool has flaws. For example, oral reading of texts can make visible, to an extent, how students think. However, the act of oral reading changes how readers comprehend, since they must pay attention to aspects of oral performance, which can inhibit understanding. Another problem is that comprehension is more complicated than just thinking about words. Oral word fluency reflects thinking, but it gives a limited picture. Also, traditional informal reading inventories often are based on an assumption that comprehension is about levels of thinking, and they focus on immediate recall, such as retelling after oral and silent reading. But good readers don't think about texts using levels like "literal" or "critical-creative." Nor do they start at the bottom of a taxonomy of thinking and move up from memory to interpretation, analysis, and so forth, as in Benjamin Bloom's model (1956; Krathwohl, 2002). Retelling what is remembered is about extracting facts and may not involve constructing meaning at all.

Finally, assessments of listening comprehension and oral language production, both of which are closely connected to reading comprehension, tend to be rare (RAND, 2002, p. 54-56). Note: Most informal reading inventories describe an option of reading to students, followed by student retelling and/or answering questions. This variation can provide an estimate of the "listening level," which shows comprehension capabilities when students are not restricted by print fluency.

## Assessment Tools *link w/ Ctra*

**T**oday a veritable cornucopia of formal and informal assessment tools is available. However, not all are congruent with constructivist philosophy, which positions personal meaning making at the center of comprehension. Fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice tests cannot show comprehension strategy use or reveal the big ideas students construct in the way writing, discussion, and arts-based projects can. Retelling and oral reading fluency tests also fall short. A compendium of informal comprehension assessment tools is included in the appendices. The following are basic tools.

### INTERVIEWS

Interviewing is not the most common assessment tool associated with comprehension, but it can be very effective in providing information about a variety of factors that affect comprehension. Gary Fife, the teacher in the following snapshot, is well aware that the background, interests, and preferences of his students loom large in their comprehension development. He uses beginning-of-the-year assessments to reveal the invisible and internal knowledge, skills/strategies, and dispositions his students will bring to texts and comprehension tasks. Gary uses many types of assessment tools during the year, including informal and formal ones. This snapshot, in the form of a Q&A, is about an informal tool: comprehension interviews.

As Gary Fife explains, interviews accomplish many purposes. Ready Resource 4.2 offers some guidelines for conducting student interviews.

### Quick tips for student interviews

- Focus on establishing a relaxed conversational atmosphere.
- Begin by explaining that the purpose of the interview is to help plan teaching.
- Let the child ask you questions to clarify the interview process.
- Jot down notes, using a form as a guide.
- Explain that the notes will help you remember what the student has told you.

4.2

READY  
RESOURCE

## classroom snapshot

### GARY FIFE'S COMPREHENSION INTERVIEWS

It is August, and Gary Fife is getting ready to start another year. Gary has taught grades one through five and says he is the first to volunteer when the principal asks for someone to change grades. "Change keeps me fresh," he explains. "It really helps me keep curricular articulation in mind. I like having experience with the full map of content and skills our district has outlined."

A high priority for Gary is gathering assessment data on his students. Since interviews are one of his favorite forms of assessment, I decided to interview him about interviews.

CC: What kinds of interviews do you use?

Gary: I try to interview every parent before school starts. I call four to five parents each day. It takes about five minutes per call. I introduce myself and then ask about the interests and strengths of the child. I like to start with positives. I then basically ask them to tell me about anything they think will help me help their child learn. If the parent has a lot of concerns, we make an appointment for a conference to take the discussion further.

CC: What is the main purpose of the parent interview?

Gary: More than anything, I want to touch base, to meet them before there are any problems. Parents are often surprised by the call. They think there already is a problem, even though school hasn't started! I want to build a relationship so when there are concerns, I can contact them and they remember I was the guy who cared enough to call before school started.

CC: How do the interviews help you teach comprehension?

Gary: Well, I do ask a few questions directly related to reading, like, "How much does your child read?" and I explain that I will be teaching my class about comprehension strategies. I actually use those terms with the kids, so I want parents to know what is going on. I can't give the parent a whole course in reading methods on the phone, but I do tell them I'll email them the strategies, and I always put an article in our monthly class newsletter about comprehension. I also give the parents a heads-up that the kids have Literacy Folios, and I track things like their strategy use. I make notes when parents tell me about hobbies and interests of their kids, and I use that information to help kids select books for independent reading. I



also encourage students to become "experts" in something. They start with an interest and do Internet and library research.

CC: So, all your students become experts?

Gary: Yes, every one of them. Some become experts in many things—everything from match-books to musicians. Some will get going on an interest and that draws in other kids. Often the interests connect with science or social studies units or something in the news, like an election.

CC: What problems do you run into with the phone interviews?

Gary: Not too many. If both parents work or there is a single working parent, I call in the evening. I leave a message during the day that I'll be calling back, or I invite them to call me at school. Occasionally a family doesn't have a phone, so I just stop by. This is a small town, so that can work well. Most of the time I get invited in for sweet tea. I'm careful to ask if they have time to talk and explain that I can come back. Oh, I've had ones who really bent my ear, usually about their own problems. Now I tell them up front that I only have a few minutes to talk, but if we need to talk more, we can make an appointment for them to come to school. That works pretty well.

CC: How do you use interviews with your students?

Gary: I enjoy those interviews. The kids tell me the most interesting things. I interview all students by the end of the first week of school. Actually, I try to interview each student before school starts, but some are farm kids and live way out.

CC: What do you ask the students?

Gary: The first interview is a general background interview about interests, hobbies, their computer background, where they have traveled, and so on. I ask them about favorite foods and colors. I had a boy last year who told me his favorite color was puce! He was serious, too. He was a great artist and was really into shades and tints and such.

CC: Are there comprehension items on that interview?

Gary: Not directly. Again, I'm trying to build a relationship and find out strengths and interests I can build on. Interests set the stage for comprehension, in my opinion. Later I do another interview that is specific to comprehension.

CC: What is it like?

Gary: I call it my Good Reader Interview. It is my bread and butter to get started with comprehension instruction. I ask all sorts of questions about reading: "What happens in your head?" "Who do you know that is a good reader?" even "What do you think reading is?" Kids can be so confused. They think good readers have to know all the words and always follow along when other kids are reading out loud. That tells me a lot. I don't use round robin reading, but I've had plenty of students who came from first grades where it is alive and well.

CC: How do you use information from the Good Reader Interview?

Gary: As I said, it is where I start. So many kids don't really have a clue that the goal is understanding. They aren't going to become good readers until they have the goal straight. Then there are kids who are right on target. They talk about picturing in their heads, being so into a book they don't want to go to sleep. Some still use flashlights under the blankets.

CC: How long does that interview take?

#### Good Reader Interview

What happens in your head when you read?

Who do you know who is a good reader?

What do you think reading is?



**Gary:** It is longer. About twenty, sometimes thirty minutes. I like to eat lunch with the kids occasionally, and I combine lunch with that interview, for some kids. I try to get one a day in, during lunch, after school, whenever I can work it in. I post a sign-up sheet so kids know where they are on the list. They actually remind me when their interview is coming up, and some will volunteer to give up recess. They like the attention.

**CC:** Isn't that a lot of interviewing during the first month?

**Gary:** It's about forty-five minutes, total, per child. It's so worth it. Information is power, and I get so much information about my students. They start to think interviews are cool. I think some watch Oprah and other interviews on TV. Some decide to do their own interviews. When I get done telling them how much I like interviewing them and they enjoy my interviews, they want to get in on the fun. Whatever we are studying, there's always the possibility of an interview. Kids interview their friends and relatives, each other, the principal. It's my favorite kind of assessment, and it has become an integral teaching tool.

**Note:** Appendices A and B include:

- Student Background and Interest Inventory
- Parent Interview
- Comprehension Strategies (CPS) Interview

## INVENTORIES AND SURVEYS

Interests + Talents | Problems + Questions ✓

Interest inventories are based on the premise that people learn faster and better when they are interested in the subject matter. The interest inventory focuses on strengths, so it is a pleasant assessment—a kind of “getting to know you.” It is a good one to start with and can be conducted in a variety of ways. One is to ask students to fold a piece of paper in half and write the heading “Interests and Talents” on the left and “Problems and Questions” on the right. Typically students list sports, games, favorite books, music, and other arts in the left column. Problems and questions will range from general concerns, like getting good grades and having too much homework, to specific issues students are facing in their lives, like bullying or worry over a parent serving in the military. Teachers can expect to be surprised by the information students share. The two-column inventory may also be used to help students find topics for writing and art making.

Inventories can be done through discussion or by the student independently. Students should be encouraged to respond in a number of ways. For example, create question cards and invite students to draw sketches in response. An interest inventory that uses movement is called Step In. Ask students to stand in a circle and then ask them to step in (or twist, slide, etc.) in response to categories you name (Cornett, 2011). For example, say, “Step in if you play a sport.” Ask for information from those who have moved, and make notes on a clipboard.

Interest inventories may be conducted as interviews, especially if a child has limited writing skills. Focus on establishing a relaxed conversational atmosphere. Begin by explaining that the interview's purpose is to help you plan

teaching. Use the guidelines presented in Ready Resource 4.2, but also take time to share a few interests of your own, and let the child ask you questions to clarify the interview process. Most children enjoy talking about what they like to do and things they know about, as long as they feel the teacher wants to listen. Jot down ideas, using a form as a guide. Explain that your notes will help you remember what the student has told you. Appendices A and B offer ideas for questions and categories, including a background inventory that asks about interests.

## CHECKLISTS AND RUBRICS

Checklists may be used to track strategies, concepts, and skills. The CPS Strategies Checklist in Appendix B involves students in tracking their own progress.

Rubrics are more elaborate checklists organized in a hierarchy to show a gradient of performance, such as the degree to which a strategy is used. There are many types of rubrics, but all use a rating scale (e.g., 1 through 4), and some include weighting. School districts often write rubrics to help make grading criteria understandable. Rubrics and checklists should focus on key comprehension strategies and big ideas. The Online Resource box below provides links to some useful websites.

## BENCHMARKS

Benchmarks are like rubrics, in that they use rank ordering. Create benchmarks by "attaching quality to a small, rank-ordered body of work samples and then using them for comparison in making judgments about a larger body of work" (Baker et al., 2004, p. 29). Without research-based benchmarks that describe adequate progress in comprehension, we "risk aiming far too low in our expectations for student learning" (RAND, 2002, xix). The comprehension rubric given in Ready Resource 4.1 can be used to help rank work samples to serve as benchmarks.

Collaborative discussions about benchmarks can dramatically change your view of assessment tools (Baker et al., 2004). To establish comprehension benchmarks, discuss several possible text responses with your students (as I'll discuss in Chapter 9) and then order them collaboratively with your students. Be sure to use high-level criteria. For example, have students collect anecdotes about people

### Useful websites for rubrics and checklists

- [www.school.discovery.com/schrockguide/assess.html](http://www.school.discovery.com/schrockguide/assess.html)
- [www.eduscapes.com/tap/topic53.htm](http://www.eduscapes.com/tap/topic53.htm)
- [www.4teachers.org/projectbased/checklists.html](http://www.4teachers.org/projectbased/checklists.html)
- [www.teach-nology.com](http://www.teach-nology.com)

using comprehension strategies. Then coach students to rank-order these behaviors according to their importance to comprehension. (As an example, retelling the plot of "The Three Little Pigs" would be ranked lower than listing themes such as "making good decisions" and "planning ahead." At the highest level would be concluding that the story explains big ideas like "Taking short cuts can lead to long-term problems.") On a simpler level, write the CPS strategies on separate index cards and ask students to work in teams to sort them into "before," "during," and "after" categories. ✓

## STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT

By reflecting on comprehension criteria, students can get a sense of how the real world operates. From HVAC technicians to dentists, workers are expected to examine their own performance continually and make necessary adjustments. Students can examine successive drafts of their own work to monitor change. Ready Resource 4.3 presents examples that teachers should use daily for discussion or writing prompts.

## PEER FEEDBACK

Students need to be taught why and how to respond to presentations, performances, and exhibits intended to demonstrate comprehension. The art of noticing must be taught and practiced so students learn to make evidence-based comments about what they see and hear. Direct them to use specific words, concepts, and feelings in their descriptions: "It made me feel \_\_\_\_," "I wonder \_\_\_\_." You may also use the learn-wonder-like (LWL) strategy, instructing students to make three columns with these labels and jot down responses in each column (look ahead to Ready Resource 7.11 in Chapter 7). Teach students that asking questions is another form of feedback.

Role-playing giving and receiving feedback is a useful activity. Have students take turns giving each other specific ideas about what is working or not working. Help students develop empathy by discussing the effects of both positive feedback and negative remarks.

←  
Learn  
Wonder  
Like  
strategy

### Example questions for student self-assessment.

1. What strategies are you trying?
2. What big ideas did you find or construct?
3. Where is the evidence for your big ideas?
4. Why did you do what you did?
5. What did you try that you have not tried before?
6. How can you use \_\_\_\_\_ (strategy) in another subject?
7. What was most difficult? Why?
8. What worked? What will you do next?
9. What did you learn most?
10. What did you like best? Why?
11. How did this compare with other comprehension tasks?

READY  
RESOURCE  
4.3

## OBSERVATION

The famous baseball coach Yogi Berra advised, "You can observe a lot by watching." Successful coaches can provide educators with useful assessment ideas, and this is one of them. No other assessment tool is as important as careful observation of students actually working with texts. Coupled with interviewing students about their thinking, observation permits real-time assessment of actual problem solving and moments of insight. Skilled observation may seem casual and effortless. It isn't. Fruitful observation is predicated on teacher knowledge. You have to know what to look for, including gradients of progress toward key comprehension goals. Refer to the CPS Checklist (Appendix B.2) and the comprehension rubric (Ready Resource 4.1) for suggestions of what indicators to look for. Personal literacy also informs observation and helps teachers understand when students are moving in the right direction toward processes like summarizing and products like big ideas.

## RECORD KEEPING

Checklists and graphs are examples of concrete ways to track comprehension growth. These records can serve as powerful tools both to motivate students and to inform parents. Any growth record needs to be as simple as possible, focusing on what's most important. Have students participate as much as possible in documenting their own comprehension growth.

## ANECDOTAL RECORDS

Make these informal notes as students work with texts and as you observe comprehension products. A clipboard works well for organizing notes on the fly. I label a square for each student with permanent marker and keep a small sticky note on each square. This helps me keep track of which students I observe. Colored-coded stickies help track days or particular strategies (e.g., pink for "before" strategies). Keep larger notepads handy for additional notes. When students know you will post stickies in their folders regularly, they are interested in what you write. Their interest reinforces the focus on assessment for learning.

## PORTFOLIOS

Teachers have long used collected work to show students' capabilities and skills. Checklists, anecdotal notes, and work samples give evidence of progress toward comprehension criteria. These work samples may be stored in folders, in three-ring binders, or in electronic format. Written products and arts responses can be invaluable progress indicators if students create them on the basis of clear comprehension criteria and if these products are then examined based on those criteria. Today's "folios" and "e-folios" offer great flexibility; for example, even student-choreographed dances can be evidence of big idea understanding. Such products can be recorded so students can view them, reflect, and assess the

degree of understanding they demonstrate. Some schools now use digital portfolios, especially in the upper grades.

Not every piece of work should be kept. Focus on work that shows something important, but keep a range of work samples; not just "good" work, so students can see progress over time. Date the work and connect items to specific goals. Revisit older work to celebrate progress and past successes.

Each child needs a container for keeping evidence of growth toward comprehension benchmarks. The evidence serves as a motivator. Store portfolios where students can access them and check their own progress. Students should also be able to add dated evidence.

A set of guidelines for portfolios appears in Ready Resource 4.4.

## CONFERENCES

Personal conferences provide valuable insight into children's thinking and convey the message that you care about their work toward specific goals. Three- to five-minute conferences allow students to discuss their comprehension goals, note their

### Guidelines for student portfolios.

#### ORGANIZATION

- 1 Encourage students to decorate the front cover.
- 2 List goals and benchmarks inside the front cover. Goals and benchmarks should include a target date, e.g., "By the end of the month/semester/year you should be able to . . ." (Review the CPS Checklist in Appendix B.2 and the com-

prehension rubric in Ready Resource 4.1 for ideas for comprehensions goals and benchmarks.)

- 3 Include dated work examples that show progress toward benchmarks. Include only work that relates to the goals and benchmarks listed in the front cover.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR MAINTAINING AND USING FOLIOS

- 1 Number portfolios so students can easily keep them in order.
- 2 Provide generic goals for students to glue to the inside of their folder. Each child should also have a choice about individual targets.
- 3 Tell the class that the goals and the folder will show how much they are learning. Explain that they need to be thinking all the time about the goals and how they can put evidence in their portfolios to show they are getting closer to the goals.
- 4 Take time to discuss comprehension goals and to teach explicitly the concept of com-

prehension as problem solving, as well as all CPS strategies. Continue to bring up the goals throughout the day. Students cannot achieve the goals if they do not know what they are and know ways to meet them.

- 5 Use the portfolios to motivate students' learning and to promote independence. Example: "I'll be looking for people who are concentrating during DEIR. I have my clipboard and sticky notes with your names. I'll give the sticky notes to you to add to your portfolio."

(continued)

READY  
RESOURCE  
4.4



## Guidelines for student portfolios, continued.

READY  
RESOURCE  
4.4

**6** Target four or five students per day for observation assessment (e.g., note concentration or focus and use of evidence during discussions). This may be done during small group work with observation checklists. See the CPS Checklist example in Appendix B.2.

**7** Conduct one- to three-minute individual conferences to review students' portfolios. Use a kitchen timer to gauge your time. Try "doing lunch" with students to accomplish this.

**8** Schedule regular "portfolio time" for students to look at their work and note progress. Students might work with partners, or the whole class can come together to share one thing added that shows growth.

**9** At least once a month, ask students to look at their goals and think about where they are and what they can do to keep growing. This may be done in small groups or as a whole group, but it should be directed by the teacher, with the teacher giving examples of goals and ways to meet goals. For example, "Everyone has a goal to make images in your head during reading. We've talked

about using the visual art elements to help. What would help you do this more often and better?"

**10** Once a month, conduct portfolio presentations: Ask students to share their portfolios with a partner. Next, come together as a whole group for students to share what they learned from their partners.

**11** Make the portfolios the focus of parent conferences. Have students show their portfolios, pointing out the goals and benchmarks to their parents and sharing evidence of their progress toward goals.

**12** Tie grades to portfolio evidence. Create a rubric that indicates what should be documented in the folder to earn an A, B, and so forth. This can be done for each grading period, or you might use an end-of-the-year rubric along with progress points during the year, as long as students and parents are very clear about the nature of their progress in terms of meeting the end-of-the-year grade goal.

**13** Let students keep their portfolios at the end of the year.

progress, and set new goals. (Use an egg timer to ensure students get equal time.) You might ask students to bring a text to demonstrate CPS strategy use. This is a good time to review checklists, notes, rubrics, and work samples. Weekly conferences are an important priority for motivating student work toward comprehension goals.

## Assessment: Task, Context, and Teacher/Teaching

**T**he previous sections of this chapter addressed assessment factors involving the learner. This section looks at three other comprehension factors: the task, the context, and the teacher/teaching. The following section then discusses the final factor: the text.

### COMPREHENSION TASK

Literacy involves many tasks, including all the sub-skills that make listening, speaking, viewing, reading, and writing possible. The task of comprehending



written texts depends on readers having a solid foundation in sub-skills such as decoding and word fluency—and these sub-skills also have sub-skills, such as phonemic awareness and alphabetic principle. These sub-skills are means to the comprehension goal, and that goal is twofold: immediate understanding and long-term knowledge gain (RAND, 2002). To achieve both aspects of comprehension, readers must become increasingly adept at using thinking strategies to find and synthesize important big ideas from texts.

Assessment should reflect the ultimate goals of comprehension—increased knowledge and use of that knowledge to solve real-life problems—but, unfortunately, widely used comprehension assessments focus heavily on only a few tasks: immediate recall/retelling, extracting ideas, and word meaning (RAND, 2002). The assessment tools described in the preceding section reflect an expanded view of the comprehension task. (Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, in particular, describe the comprehension task in detail.)

The comprehension rubric in Ready Resource 4.1 is based on an expanded view of comprehension, using specific descriptors for the “top” level of both the comprehension product and the comprehension process. Teachers can use this tool to create a full four-level comprehension rubric to give students a clearer picture of comprehension goals.

✓  
Knowledge  
and  
ability to  
use knowledge  
to solve  
real-life  
problems

## CONTEXT

✓  
The place of text use (i.e., where and with whom the learner is encountering the text) was discussed in Chapter 3. Any environment, including a classroom, can encourage a culture of acceptance and encouragement or be a place that threatens and discourages. To facilitate comprehension, the classroom should be stimulating physically and psychologically. Look back to Ready Resource 3.4 in Chapter 3 for a checklist to use in assessing the classroom context for its potential to facilitate comprehension and to identify ways the classroom may inhibit comprehension.

## TEACHERS/TEACHING

The effect of a teacher's personal knowledge and beliefs on comprehension was discussed in Chapter 3. The self-assessment in Ready Resource 3.3 can yield important information about a teacher's knowledge of comprehension strategies.

Although the comprehension task is often determined by the teacher, the ultimate goal is student self-determination. The thread of establishing student independence by increasing responsibility incrementally runs through comprehension best practices. You can informally self-assess your knowledge about best practices by using Ready Resource 3.5 and by studying the descriptions of effective and ineffective practices provided in Appendices D and E. You might consider to what extent you are encouraging independence and how to do so more effectively. For example, you might set a goal to have students increasingly generate their own questions for discussions so they become less dependent on yours.



## Text Assessment

**T**exts—and whether they meet the needs and goals of the learner—are the fifth comprehension factor considered in assessment. Chapter 1 introduced a contemporary concept of text that includes verbal (word-based), non-verbal, print, non-print, digital, and arts-based materials. The characteristics of a text (e.g., its organization, content, and format) have a tremendous effect on how readers process the information it contains, and whether the reader even continues to use the text. For example, we readily flip to another television channel or click to another website if a show or site doesn't suit our needs and interests. Interest inventories help match students and texts. However, in addition to interest, we must consider several other factors when assessing texts for students, including accessibility, readability, and reading level.

### INTEREST LEVEL

The sophistication and maturity level of a text's content, ideas, and themes affect how interesting it will be for a reader. These are not the only factors that influence interest. A text's format and organization can provide interest, especially if the form is new to the reader. For example, pop-up books and interactive Internet sites attract certain readers because of the texts' kinesthetic nature. Certain genres and authors may be of more interest than others.

### ACCESSIBILITY

Texts must be accessible. Teachers should consider whether students have the background and emotional and cognitive maturity for the content of a text, be it a video on YouTube, a song, or a book. Judging a text's content appropriateness and the potential for a student to make sense of it can be complex. In the case of word-based print texts, students not only need the background and thinking strategies to comprehend its meaning, they also need to be able to recognize a large percentage of the words and attach appropriate meanings to those words.

### READABILITY

For more than fifty years, readability formulas have helped teachers match students with books. Formulas such as the Fry and Fog estimate text difficulty based on variables such as average sentence length and number of multisyllabic words in several hundred-word samples. The resulting text levels indicate whether readers of a certain proficiency can be expected to comprehend the material. This is important because reading improvement comes from regular reading of texts that are not too difficult or too easy.

Advances in technology and statistical analysis have led to improvements in readability science. Lexiles is an example of the computer-based measures now available that rely on full scans of texts. Using more than a text sample aids accuracy, but with computer-based measures the criteria used must be comput-

er friendly. Word counts and sorts, along with sentence length and complexity, are still used. Appendix C.3 gives Lexiles for familiar titles.

In truth, a text's actual readability is more complex than what a computer can recognize. Whether a text is readable has much to do with the reader's prior knowledge or background about the text topic, interest in the topic, and capability to use comprehension strategies. There are many text characteristics that readability formulas do not consider, such as suitability of content for a specific child. Indeed, interest in a topic can trump a text's difficulty. What's more, there are no definitive criteria to judge literary merit or artistic excellence, either. Decisions about these matters are left to informed educators and parents. Recommended criteria for assessing texts appear in Appendix C along with a correlation among Lexiles, grade levels, and other popular text levels.

## READING LEVEL

While readability applies to text difficulty, reading level is about the reader. Teachers use estimates of students' reading (comprehension) levels to help select appropriate texts. It cannot be emphasized enough that reading levels, like text levels, are abstract constructs created by people. They are not absolutes. A child's reading level is always an estimate. No test perfectly determines which texts are right for all students. There are too many variables (e.g., the Five Factors). Reading level is influenced by the test maker's definition of comprehension, and the test items.

Different assessment tools yield different reading levels. For example, one standardized test may report a grade level estimate of 5.5. That result may indicate the level of text a student can be expected to comprehend independently, or it may suggest a text level that could be used if the student has instructional support. The Lexile level is based on the assumption that the reader needs 90 percent word accuracy and 75 percent comprehension to read a text successfully. That is considered an "instructional level." But what does it mean to comprehend three-quarters of a text? We need to remember that percentages and other quantifications of comprehension have ambiguous meanings that we should question and cross-reference with other assessment information.

Instruments use categories, based on limited criteria, to define reading levels. Tests such as informal reading inventories determine these levels for individual students. In general, a person's independent level will be the lowest numerical level and frustration the highest. For example, a child's independent level may be 2.0, instructional 2.5, and frustration 3.0. The listening level may equal the frustration level, or it may be higher. The percentages cited below vary greatly depending on the test and the Five Factors.

- Independent (easy). Reader can read the text with few word identification problems and high comprehension. Standards vary from 95 to 99 percent for word accuracy and achieve better than 90 percent comprehension of text.
- Instructional (challenging). Word accuracy is 90 to 95+ percent and comprehension 75+ percent. A student needs help using texts at this level. At minimum, the teacher needs to introduce important words and phrases.

do a guided walk-through, and supply relevant background knowledge to help the reader understand the text content.

- **Frustration (difficult).** The reader achieves less than 90 percent word accuracy and less than 50 percent comprehension. A text at this level is too hard for the learner. However, a student with a lot of background relevant to the topic and a high interest in the text can succeed, with teacher or computer support (e.g., CD-ROM to assist with word pronunciation and explanation).
- **Listening.** The listening level estimates comprehension potential, removing the limitations of print decoding. At the listening level, the student can understand 75+ percent of the key concepts and big ideas if the text is read to him or her.

Learners benefit from texts matched to their personal characteristics and reading goals. Texts should be selected that are not too difficult but nonetheless present some challenge, and that are suited to the maturity, background, and interests of particular students.

## Effective Differentiated Instruction

**A** central purpose of assessment is to gather information in order to design instruction that is appropriate for the particular needs and strengths of students. Villegas and Lucas (2007) contend that “teachers have an ethical obligation to help all students learn” (p. 32). That is lofty talk, but most teachers probably would concur. Walking the talk, however, is hard work, driven by assessment. Teacher Gary Fife starts with interviews, but, like all effective teachers, he draws from a “panoply of practices” to assess and create instruction that matches students’ needs (NRP, 2000; Pressley et al., 2001). The matching process is currently called “differentiation.”

The root of the word “differentiate” is *differ*, which means *vary*. Students vary. While people of all ages and stages share commonalities, each child is unlike any other. Differentiated instruction is teaching made different because students are different. This is not a 21st-century idea. Differentiated instruction has 20th-century roots in personalized, tailored, and individualized instruction. Labels change, but the beliefs that underpin the concept of differentiation have remained strong and consistent. Why? Because differentiation has a dramatic and positive effect on achievement. Given current technological advances, we have more possibilities than ever before to design instruction that not only responds to differences, but *encourages* differences.

Educators and parents have long known that children cannot be treated equally—that just isn’t fair. All children need help with some tasks to succeed. All need challenge, as well. Most students become literate by following the general developmental path from simple to complex, but each child proceeds at his or her own speed and needs varying levels of support. While some go straight, others zigzag. One-size-fits-all instruction will not suitably outfit the diverse children traveling the literacy road (Reutzel, 2007). Assessment allows teachers to create instructional maps suited to individual needs and strengths.

## LEARNER DIFFERENCES

The list of all the ways learners can be different would fill more than one book. Differences among and within students have a major impact on what they need to learn, the pace at which they can learn, and the support they need to learn well (Tomlinson, 2000). Teachers who successfully differentiate instruction understand that comprehension is inextricably linked to a larger socio-cultural context. Students represent diverse groups, each with a worldview very different from the others based on

- socio-cultural background, values, and customs
- ethnicity/race
- language(s) spoken
- economic status
- religious practices
- political views
- physical abilities

Of course, educators can address only those differences to which schools can reasonably respond. For example, family income predicts student test scores, but schools cannot have much effect on the economic circumstances of families. Schools do try to compensate for some realities of poverty by getting more books into the hands of poor children. Teachers tap students' strengths and interests and teach them how to use family traditions and stories as sources for writing and art. This strategy shows respect for students' background, and it parallels how adult writers use their personal background to create their products.

Students differ further in their *specific* cognitive, physical, and emotional development and in their background experiences and past learning opportunities. As teachers start each new year, they face the task of getting to know the individuals who make up the class. Some of the questions that teachers will ask are specific to comprehension, but others are general. Some are listed in Ready Resource 4.5. Additional questions that should shape assessment as well as differentiated instruction include:

- What is special about this child?
- What is the student's background (socio-cultural, economic, linguistic, etc.)?
- What values does the learner hold (e.g., cultural and religious)?
- What does the learner already know and what can she or he do?
- What are the student's strengths and general developmental needs?
- What about needs of the moment (e.g., a recent family death)?
- What particular experiences have shaped this student, including school successes or failures?

## DIFFERENTIATION GOALS

Americans have a tradition of valuing diversity. Diversity is our heritage, and tendencies to experiment and take risks rewarded our ancestors. Stark differences among members make families, communities, and the nation interesting and strong; embracing difference increases our adaptability, heightens our empathy, and broadens our perspective. Creating cookie-cutter kids is not a justifiable

## General questions: Beginning-of-the-year comprehension assessment, or "Getting to know your students."

READY RESOURCE  
4.5

### LEARNER

- 1 What is the learner interested in? How can interests be used to motivate the learner to use texts to make meaning?
- 2 How developed is the student's ability to attend, focus, concentrate, and persist in the face of problems?
- 3 What general literacy knowledge and skills does the student have?
- 4 What prior knowledge does the learner have about topics to be studied?

### TASK

- 1 Is the child motivated to make sense actively by finding and constructing big ideas? Does the student understand that the goal of reading is to make sense using prior knowledge and other thinking strategies in the problem-solving process?
- 2 What comprehension strategies does the child possess that would permit him or her to make sense of different texts?
- 4 How independent is the learner at the coordinated use of CPS strategies to make sense of texts? To what degree can the learner generate questions to propel problem solv-

ing forward, with a focus on finding and constructing big ideas?

- 5 How developed are the learner's vocabulary and fluency skills?

### TEXT

- 1 What experiences has the student had with the types of texts to be used? What about technology (computer use)?
- 2 What does the learner think the purpose(s) for text use are? How does the learner's thinking align with profiles of good readers?

### CONTEXT

- 1 What contexts for learning are likely to facilitate the student's success?

### WHAT NEXT?

Two additional questions pull assessment information together to be acted upon:

- 1 What should the priority comprehension goals be for this student, and in what order should learning experiences happen?
- 2 How can assessment information about comprehension development, goals, and progress be shared in an ongoing manner with the student and her or his parents?

American educational goal. Teaching for conformity and uniformity prepare for the status quo. The future is all about change, and it beckons us to be more intentional than conventional. To achieve this goal, comprehension instruction must be differentiated in order to *promote* differences while ensuring that all of our students have basic knowledge and skills to solve problems in creative ways.

Differentiated instruction seeks to "maximize each student's growth" by starting at a student's current level and creating interventions to move her or him forward (Kiernan, 2000). In practice, differentiation results in instruction that varies in delivery, materials use, and activities. For example, the teacher modifies the difficulty level, instructional intensity, or amount of time each child spends with given texts. Ready Resource 4.6 lists ten areas where teachers might think about how to differentiate. The mnemonic "PARTICULAR" can help you remember them.



## Ten ways to differentiate (PARTICULAR).

The goal of differentiated instruction is student success. The means is to differentiate tasks, texts, teaching, and context to fit each learner's unique profile. Differentiation is about changing *what* is taught, *how*, *when*, *where*, *by* or *with whom*, and with what *expectations* (product).

### KEY QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS:

- What do I know about the student's strengths and needs?
- What comprehension product (content/ideas/concepts) and processes (skills/strategies) are to be learned?
- Why is the lesson important to the learner?
- How might the comprehension product or process be adjusted for the student's strengths and needs (e.g., pre-test and then compact the content)?
- When would the student be most successful? Is the student ready for this lesson?
- Where would the student learn best? With whom?
- What materials are best suited to this student's needs?
- What options can I offer for the student to demonstrate comprehension (assessment)?

The acronym **PARTICULAR** can help you think more specifically about the above questions and address the particular needs of particular students (Cornett, 2011).

**P** **PLACE:** Change the physical location or aspects of the environment to create more supportive conditions. Students are more productive when classrooms and schools offer a sense of community in which students feel significant and respected.

**A** **AMOUNT:** Increase or decrease the amount of content to be studied or the amount of time allotted.

**R** **RATE:** Slow down or speed up. For more able learners, pre-test and compact the curriculum. Allow some students to skip some tasks.

**T** **TARGET/TASK:** Change the comprehension task (CPS process or product) by offering tiered choices: students may focus on fewer strategies or be expected to find and construct varying amounts of big ideas supported with evidence.

**I** **INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT:** Adapt high-priority best practices, including explicit teaching, scaffolding (coached practice with examples and feedback), high-level questions, and motivational strategies. Look back at Ready Resource 3.5 in Chapter 3 for a list of best practices.

**C** **CURRICULAR MATERIALS:** Select texts that the student can use successfully. Consider the student's interest and background, text difficulty and structure, and genre (e.g., fiction/nonfiction).

**U** **UTENSILS:** Select other media and tools as appropriate to student needs (e.g., computer software, art materials, writing implements and surfaces, music).

**L** **LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY:** Make the lesson somewhat challenging, using surprise, interest, and mystery to engage.

**A** **ASSISTANCE:** Consider who the student should work with and under what circumstances (e.g., alone or collaboratively, with a partner or group). Use flexible grouping.

**R** **RESPONSE OPTIONS:** Vary the ways students can show they understand by offering choices ranging from writing to creating visual art, drama, dance, and musical products. All responses should have clear criteria to ensure they are connected to the target task.

4.6

READY  
RESOURCE

### *Fitting differentiation with standards*

In the recent past, the curriculum of many schools has become constricted—time for science, social studies, and the arts has been cut. Teachers feel compelled to “cover” tested standards even though we know “covering” will not boost test scores. Teachers often feel powerless and are distressed by pressures to make every student competent at the same level with the same content using the same texts.

The standards movement has provoked a national conversation about what is most important to learn. Unfortunately, the discussion is often reduced to how to make education more predictable. Standards imply standardization, uniformity, and conformity—yet, ironically, teachers are concurrently admonished to respond to *diverse* student needs (Tomlinson, 2000). Standards imply there are to be no surprises. Differentiation and standards-based teaching have to coexist if the goal is success for all students, but Tomlinson (2002) proposes educators step back and ask questions like these:

- Do current standards represent the knowledge and skills valued most by experts in each discipline? Is revision in order?
- Are standards reflected in the curriculum, or have they *become* the curriculum?
- How can standards-based curricula be organized so that students have time to make sense of ideas and master skills rather than “race through material to meet benchmarks”?

Misinterpretation of the purpose of standards and misunderstanding of how to use them can erode teachers’ morale, eviscerate the curriculum, and cripple teacher efforts to customize instruction for student needs. Standards are one source for curriculum development: they are meant to offer guidance about *what* to teach. Differentiation, on the other hand, is process oriented, focusing on *how* to teach (Tomlinson, 2000). Differentiation is not a recipe. On the contrary, it is part of the instructional problem solving that is initiated by the kind of assessment discussed in this chapter. Teachers collect assessment data so that they can differentiate instruction that targets standards, making student success more likely. Ready Resource 4.7 summarizes what differentiation is and is not.

### *Assuming a differentiation orientation*

Children learn differently as a result of both genetics and upbringing. General developmental human growth patterns can guide teachers’ expectations of how children might respond to instruction, but nature and nurture interact to cause each child to become one of a kind. Universal student success is impossible unless teachers respond to the diverse characteristics each student possesses. Of course, some children need more responsive instruction—instruction that is differentiated for their particular needs and interests. The following ideas offer a “differentiation orientation” to help teachers implement best comprehension practices. In particular, teachers need to guard against contributing to

## What differentiation is and is not.

### DIFFERENTIATION INVOLVES

- Engaging every teacher in problem solving to craft appropriate instruction that predicts what, where, when, how, and with whom students will learn best.
- Making changes within classrooms, not moving students out.
- Using ongoing assessment data to plan instruction suited to each learner's profile of needs, interests, and preferences (e.g., multiple intelligences).
- Delivering high-end curriculum for all students, using varied approaches, including flexible groups.
- Getting all students to work toward understanding rich content with varying degrees of complexity.
- Scaffolding to support students so they can achieve at a higher level than would be possible without differentiation (see Chapter 5).
- Creating a context of mutual respect and shared responsibility between teachers and students.
- Giving students choices, balanced with teacher decisions about curriculum and instruction.

### DIFFERENTIATION IS

- Necessary for all students to reach goals and standards regarding what they should know, be, and do.
- NOT a recipe. There are an infinite number of ways to differentiate.
- NOT just changing amount. Struggling learners don't need "less of what they don't understand, and advanced learners don't need more of what they already know" (Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008).
- NOT creating a different lesson plan for each student. There are times when whole-group instruction is appropriate for meeting individual needs, while at other times one-on-one instruction is needed.

READY  
RESOURCE  
4.7

comprehension problems and, instead, make adjustments to increase students' comprehension, especially for low-performing students (RAND, 2002).

**Embrace diversity.** Teachers need to believe that difference can be an asset and not necessarily a liability. Socio-culturally conscious teachers know that their personal worldview is not universal and that it may not match that of their students. A person's worldview is profoundly influenced by his or her "life experiences, as mediated by a variety of factors, including race, ethnicity, gender and social class" (Villegas & Lucas, 2007, p. 31). For example, some cultures subordinate the value of individuals to that of the group, an attitude that conflicts with American culture. Some students from these cultures may be uncomfortable with individual attention and praise (Villegas & Lucas). Teacher should be sensitive to this fact and not use any teaching tool uniformly.

**Eliminate low expectations.** Hundreds of studies document the influence of teacher expectations on student achievement. This effect is known as the "self-fulfilling prophecy." Abundant research demonstrates that children live up to high or low expectations communicated in verbal and non-verbal ways. For example, teachers may tend to touch and stand closer to students who are achievers. They smile at them more, give them more chances, and affirm their efforts more often (Tauber, 1997). Teachers need to guard against creating a culture of low expectations for children who are disadvantaged by poverty or background. It does happen. McDermott and Varenne (1995) found that teachers working with high achievers focused on higher-order thinking about texts and reading for understanding. The same teachers, when working with low achievers, focused on low-level factual reading, interrupted children's reading more frequently, and talked little about comprehension as the goal.

A "culture of low expectations" is manifested when teachers give students from low-status groups unwarranted amounts of drill, practice, and rote learning activities. Children suffer when teachers focus on words and facts and neglect challenging work marked by "what if and I wonder why" questions (Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2007, p. 35; Villegas & Lucas, 2007, p. 32). The accompanying box offers additional tips for supporting students and guarding against expressing low expectations.

**Make quantitative and qualitative changes.** Best comprehension practices are appropriate for all learners, but they should be adjusted to fit specific students. The kinds of and amounts of coaching, questions, and options for responding to texts all matter when it comes to differentiating comprehension instruction (Taylor et al., 1999). Some students need more think alouds to master CPS strategies, while others need different examples from different people, including peers. Some students need individual tutoring, while others need a teacher



### *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy (SFP): Ways to Show Belief in Students*

Be courteous	Speak respectfully to students.
Listen	Listen actively to students. Respond verbally and non-verbally.
Be close	Stand near students. Use touch judiciously, such as touching an arm with two fingers.
Show interest	Ask about students' interests.
Give chances	Make sure everyone has an opportunity to respond.
Offer help	Give individual assistance.
Wait	Give three to five seconds for a student to respond.
Give feedback	Describe exactly what the student is doing that is working and not working.
Ask high-level questions	Ask students why, how, what if, and what do you think questions.
Clarify	Ask students to explain their thinking to reach better understanding.
Discipline	Remain calm and make clear your behavioral expectations.

who will alter the work itself. For example, a student may become adept at predicting or summarizing using a non-verbal text (e.g., a piece of art) when she or he has failed at applying those thinking strategies to a word-based text. Once a student masters a strategy with one kind of text, the teacher can help the student transfer the strategy to another kind of text.

A student's ability to negotiate various texts may be affected by the range of individual characteristics previously discussed. Background knowledge and socio-cultural factors seem to advantage Euro-American students, because discourse forms in most school texts more closely match their language background (RAND, 2002). Teachers can facilitate student comprehension by using specific learner factors to select texts. For example, English learners read culturally familiar material faster, recall it more accurately, and make fewer comprehension errors.

**Take the student's point of view.** Teachers are well served by periodically sitting in students' desks, both figuratively and literally. It is easy to forget the obstacles words can put up. For example, by fourth grade students may lack the strategies to comprehend large chunks of text that must be read in relatively short periods of time. Inadequate background knowledge and lack of special vocabularies to comprehend content texts are common problems. This pattern of difficulties persists, even though educators have known the important role of vocabulary in content comprehension for over seventy-five years (RAND, 2002 citing Whipple, 1925). Chapter 8 describes vocabulary learning strategies, including a set of word-solving tools, that help students achieve increasing independence in constructing meaning.

Today's students may even reject "school literacy" as irrelevant compared to popular technologically dominated communication. Teachers can provide important bridges that make texts accessible to students. For example, explicit teaching of CPS strategies using alternative texts, including digital texts, is crucial to establishing relevancy.

**Look for similarities as well as differences.** The array of differences and difficulties that operate in the lives of majority monolingual students are also present in the lives of minority students and English learners. Despite differences, students have much in common. Certainly, they exhibit similar symptoms when they have comprehension difficulties. Differentiation principles should guide instructional adjustments, but best practices are appropriate for all.

### *Avoiding detrimental differentiation*

Not all differentiated instruction is helpful. Uninformed teachers can make mistakes. For example, when teachers react negatively to students' dialects, this differentiated response has a more adverse effect on reading comprehension than the students' use of dialect (RAND, 2002). A dismal image has emerged from observations of teachers working with children from poor families and non-Euro-American English learners (Allington, 1983; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989; Duke, 2000). These students tend to receive harmful forms of differentiation such as the following:



- Lower-quality literacy activities, with more focus on skills and less focus on text interpretation, especially discussion to promote higher-order thinking and expecting students to use more developed language to respond.
- Placement in the lowest reading groups and lowest tracks, where isolated-skill instruction dominates and best practices are neglected.
- More teacher-dominated instruction that expects passive student response.
- More assignments to read and write single words and brief texts rather than lengthy texts.
- Provision of few or no computers, or computers that have only low-level practice-oriented software.

High-stakes tests that measure limited low-level competencies, require little inferring, and use forced-choice questions cause teachers to de-emphasize higher comprehension. If teachers expect low achievement, they often get what they expect.

Also troubling is the pattern found with students who have a history of reading problems in early grades. These students are likely to have had teachers who underestimate their capabilities by

- asking mostly low-level factual questions.
- correcting oral reading more frequently than is justified.
- rarely focusing on comprehension as the goal of reading.
- defining comprehension as getting or taking meaning rather than *making or constructing* meaning.

Students taught in this way come to dislike reading. They then read less, so they get less practice and accrue less knowledge to bring to reading. They simply never catch up (Allington, 2002a).

Positive differentiation is necessary to meet the needs of all students and is the key to comprehension success for English learners and students disadvantaged by background. Comprehension instruction that includes explicit teaching of strategies and self-monitoring has shown promise with these types of students (RAND, 2002).

## DIFFERENTIATING FOR SUCCESS: STUDENTS WHO ARE LOW PERFORMING

Assessment information allows teachers to artfully select, adapt, and use best comprehension practices with low-performing students (Reutzel, 2007). The following examples fall within best practices that embrace the explicit teaching of comprehension problem solving for the purpose of constructing meaning. These modifications provide the sort of comprehension scaffolding learners need. They are organized using the before/during/after categories that align with the CPS process. Many rely on additional diagnostic testing, especially for Tier 2 and 3 students in Response to Intervention (RtI) programs. More information on RtI is provided in the box at right.

Lesson Plan  
Section  
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### ***BEFORE reading, viewing, or listening***

- *Activate prior knowledge:* Use extended discussions to call up background experiences relevant for the upcoming text.
- *Frontload:* Teach essential background knowledge, key concepts, and vocabulary related to the text. Use a pre-test or pre-reading discussion to determine content or vocabulary gaps.
- *Cue strategy use:* Remind students to use multiple comprehension strategies to increase understanding. Use a visual to review strategies about which students have questions.
- *Writing:* Use pre-reading and post-reading writing and discussion to increase student engagement with ideas and response to text. For example, engage students in freewriting, listing, webbing, brainstorming, or word association related to a topic.
- *Use visuals:* Use story maps, graphic organizers, and other visuals to help students structure their thinking. For example, create a form for students to record narrative literary elements during reading: characters, setting, problems, plot events, resolution, and themes or big ideas.

### ***DURING and AFTER reading, viewing, or listening***

- *Monitor:* Coach students to stop periodically and self-assess whether comprehension is happening. Teach them to ask, "What have I learned? What relates to my purpose or problem? What makes sense?"
- *Inference scaffold:* Ask students to restate information from the text during reading.
- *Assign projects:* Embed new ideas and skills in projects that are interesting and have clear meaning in students' lives.
- *Use hands-on activities:* Teach in ways that connect to students' lives (e.g., teach poetry using "rhythm and poetry" [RAP] music).

It is recommended that diverse texts be used, including primary texts, fiction and nonfiction, and verbal and non-verbal texts, including Internet texts. In particular, songs permit many students to practice CPS strategies, even those

## ***Response to Intervention (RtI)***

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 included a problem-solving mechanism that links special education with regular education to help struggling students more quickly. IDEA did not provide states or districts with a prescribed method of implementing RtI. Some states and districts have implemented a three-tier plan; for example,

Tier 1 (all children), Tier 2 (students need more assessment to diagnose and provide more intense intervention), and Tier 3 (students receive additional assessment and the most intense intervention, including one-on-one tutoring). Other states use a five- or six-tier plan. For more information about RtI, visit <http://idea.ed.gov/download/statute.html>.

who do not have print fluency. For example, students can listen to songs to find and create big ideas using all the CPS strategies. Of course, most will need explicit teaching before attempting this independently.

## DIFFERENTIATING FOR SUCCESS: ENGLISH LEARNERS

Ready Resource 4.8 provides a profile of the growing population of English learners (EL) and lists influences on English learning.

### Profile: English learners (EL)

NCELA (2006) reports the following statistics:

- There are approximately 4.7 million EL students in the United States.
- This represents a 95 percent increase since 1991.
- 16 states have experienced an increase in EL population that exceeds 200 percent since 1991.
- ELs make up 19 percent of the total school population.
- 79 percent of ELs are Spanish speakers.
- Less than 2 percent of ELs are Vietnamese, Hmong, and Cantonese, and the rest represent 380 different language groups.

**Characteristics:** English learners are not homogeneous. Students differ in age, country of origin, mother tongue, socioeconomic status, and access to formal schooling.

- Compared with monolingual English speakers, English learners typically
  - have less background for topics in English texts or tests.
  - know less English vocabulary.
  - have difficulty with questions that rely on background. (e.g., Garcia, 1991)
- Literacy development is affected by home and school environments. Important factors are
  - the age at which second-language learning is initiated.
  - the language in which exposure to print and early literacy instruction is initiated.
  - the child's degree of proficiency in a first or second language.
  - the child's proficiency in the language in which print exposure and literacy instruction begins.
  - the degree of support for first- and second-language learning and literacy development. (RAND, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998)
- When ELs are immersed in second-language learning, learning in the first language and in English may be impeded.
- Limited English oral language does impede learning to read English, but a student who can read in a native language is more likely to learn to read a second language. Carlo concludes, "a 12-year-old who can read in first language needs different instruction from a 16-year-old who never went to school—who can't read at all" (2007, p. 104).

Sources: Carlo, 2007; Gersten & Baker, 2000; RAND, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998.

Studies of English learners who read well reveal strategies that can be taught to all English learners. For example, successful second-language readers use strategies and knowledge acquired in a first language to approach reading in the second language. They also use bilingual strategies, such as drawing upon cognates, paraphrased translating, code mixing, and switching (RAND, 2002). Less successful learners tend not to transfer strategies across languages, and some think they have to keep languages separate to prevent confusion.

Comprehension success for students from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds depends on implementing the best practices described in this book, including use of assessment to construct learner profiles and differentiate instruction for their needs, interests, and preferences. Learner profiles intersect with the task of comprehension. This necessitates the teaching of words, decoding, and fluency alongside explicit instruction in comprehension strategies that permit access to big ideas. English learners need time to engage in extended reading of diverse texts, just as any other student does, and they benefit from choices in how to respond to texts, including written, arts-based, and computer options. English learners need to learn how to use technology and multimedia to support content learning, as well. All of these recommendations fall within the best practices framework that culminates in student participation in main literacy events and the embedding of content lessons with comprehension strategies. Ready Resource 4.9 includes further recommendations.

### English learners: What works?

The following conclusions, which relate to the Five Factors that influence comprehension, should guide work with students whose first language is not English.

**EL needs:** In addition to the same needs all learners have, ELs need

- respect for their native languages. Teachers need to see the mother language as an asset.
- freedom to use their native language to (1) understand difficult concepts, including translation of test directions, (2) validate the worth of the first language, and (3) form relationships.

**Task needs:** In addition to general guidelines about CPS and inquiry into big ideas using important questions, ELs need

- teachers who understand that people only need to learn to read and write once. If a student is already literate in one language, the teacher should build on this ability to teach English and should not be overly concerned about pronunciation (Au, 2002).
- familiar content. They have the conceptual background for lessons, even though they may not know the English words that label these concepts.

(continued)

4.9

READY RESOURCE

## English learners: What works?, continued

- ▣ discussions in which they can participate, first with short answers and then with increasingly longer responses.
- ▣ study guides that define relevant vocabulary and outline key concepts in English, using simplified language.
- ▣ correction of language when appropriate (e.g., grammar and formal usage) and with sensitivity.

**Text needs:** ELs need content-rich, diverse texts, including

- ▣ bilingual dictionaries.
- ▣ texts in their native language.
- ▣ dual-language texts (written in both languages).
- ▣ texts with strong visual supports, e.g., pictures.
- ▣ assistive technology (e.g., CD-ROMs that allow students to click on words for pronunciation or meaning, and speech synthesizer software for spelling support).
- ▣ texts about universal experiences, such as being a newcomer.

**Context:** ELs need comfortable and psychologically supportive and stimulating learning environments.

**Teachers:** ELs need teachers who

1. believe being bilingual is not detrimental to academic learning. Every study comparing English-only and bilingual teaching confirms this conclusion. (Carlo, 2007).
2. know learning to read builds on oral language. Students need to hear lots of English (e.g., read alouds, discussion).
3. have a whole-child focus and celebrate diversity.

**Teaching:** All nine best comprehension practices apply (review Ready Resource 3.5 in Chapter 3). The following are examples of student needs:

- ▣ Comprehension assessment in the native language (e.g., interest inventory, comprehension strategies)
- ▣ A multisensory approach (visual, auditory/oral, kinesthetic, tactile [VAKT]) that uses "real things"—items that can be touched, seen, heard, and so forth. Examples are videos, virtual field trips, models, and artifacts. The Internet is a rich source.
- ▣ Opportunities for informal and formal oral language use
- ▣ Vocabulary development and word-solving strategies to anchor comprehension. For example, teach cognates that are shared among languages and point out similar words.
- ▣ Arts-based teaching that allows non-verbal responses
- ▣ Visuals for vocabulary and concept understanding. For example, post key words (e.g., directions, high-frequency environmental words like "exit" and "entrance") with pictures.

## Conclusion

**C**omprehension is influenced by who is using the text, what text is being used, and where, how, and why the text is being used. When a person reads matters, too. Some folks read to put themselves to sleep at night; others can't imagine starting the day without the newspaper. This chapter addressed these topics as they relate to assessment.

The chapter described assessment as integral to instructional problem solving. It discussed the Five Factors that influence comprehension as a way to organize assessment for the purpose of collecting data and shaping differentiated instruction. The Five Factors are infinitely variable, making each act of comprehension like live theatre, never to be replicated. Think about yourself reading this text or using another text under different circumstances. How does the context (e.g., whom you are with) change both your reaction to a text and your subsequent understanding of it? Perhaps you can think of a film you have seen with friends or a song you heard at a concert. In particular, think about how your emotions are affected by the context of using a text. The Five-Factor model implies that teachers must respond to these influences.

The latter part of the chapter examined underserved students, such as English learners and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Recommendations were made for differentiating instruction to facilitate comprehension success.

### CHAPTER

## 4 big ideas

The following are examples of big ideas from this chapter. Use the list to synthesize your own list of priority big ideas related to assessing to differentiate comprehension instruction.

1. Assessment is the data-gathering part of instructional problem solving.
2. A major goal of assessment should be to motivate learners.
3. Teachers need multiple informal assessment tools to gather information about learners, the comprehension task, texts, learning contexts, and their own teaching.
4. A key instructional goal is to *increase* differences among students.
5. Assessment results allow teachers to differentiate instruction, with a focus on learners' strengths and needs.
6. When the task of comprehending is reduced to test taking, student thinking and motivation are diminished.
7. A growing body of research-based strategies helps teachers differentiate for diverse learners, including English learners and low-performing students.
8. Differentiation can be both detrimental and helpful to learning.